[Mrs. I. E. Doane]

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Social Customs

SOCIAL CUSTOMS OF THE PAST

Mrs. I. E. Doane of Beaufort, who is 81 years old, gives an interesting picture of life in the Lowcountry of South Carolina during the Civil War period. She was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Cummings and one of eleven children. She was born in Barnwell County, but moved with her parents while a small child to the lower end of Colleton County, where her father had purchased 3,000 acres of land in the fork of the Salkehatchie River. The family was living there when the war began and her father entered the Confederate army.

Mrs. Doane remembers very little of the beginning of the war, since she was only four years old. However, she recalls the excitement on the plantation when they heard the

booming of big guns from the coast. They did not know then what had happened, but later learned that Port Royal and Beaufort had fallen.

Recollections of the years which followed and of her mother's struggles to feed and clothe her large family are indelibly stamped upon her memory, however. The oldest of the children was a boy of fourteen and with his help and that of two faithful slaves, Peter and a woman called “Mudder”, who remained with the family, her mother continued to operate the plantation. That she was a very level-headed woman was proven by an incident which Mrs. Doane relates. Mrs. Doane's father had left the gin house full of cotton when he went off to war. Some of their neighbors also had a large supply of cotton on hand, but hearing 2 that the Yankees were coming, they decided to burn it rather than give the enemy the pleasure. They tried to persuade Mrs. Cummings to do likewise, but she refused, replying that if the Yankees came and burned the cotton, there was nothing she could do about it, but until that time came, she would keep it. The Yankees never came and she thus saved the cotton and the proceeds of its sale after the war enabled the family to make a fresh start.

Mrs. Doane says they never even saw any Yankees except for a few stragglers who passed now and then. When Sherman's army was approaching, the Confederates burned the bridge across Salkehatchie River to prevent them crossing, which proved to be most fortunate for the Cummings' family. The river was very high from recent rains and the Yankees were unable to get across. So that, although Sherman's army was so near they could hear them on the other side of the river, this plantation at least escaped the fate which fell to many in this section.

Undisturbed by marauding Yankees, the Cummings' were frequently visited by Confederate soldiers. These, ragged and half-starved, passed in hordes, raiding their provisions, killing their chickens, hogs and cattle. Althought this was hard, Mrs. Cummings did not begrudge food to these soldiers. Mrs. Doane says she well remembers her mother and “Mudder” baking hoecakes in the kitchen for these hungry soldiers, who were 3 so

ravenous that they could not wait for the bread to be browned on both sides, but would snatch it from their hands and eat it half-cooked. She recalls seeing her mother dish up sauer-kraut for the soldiers until they had eaten her entire winter's supply - two barrels.

Late one afternoon word came that Confederate soldiers were passing through Salkehatchie, near Yemassee, and that her father was among them. He could not get away to visit his family, but wanted them to meet him at Salkehatchie. It did not take her mother long to make plans. She gave the children their supper, then laid mattresses in the big covered wagon, which was used to haul provisions from Charleston, and put them to bed under the watchful care of “Mudder”, who was indeed like a second mother to them. Peter drove the wagon, which was also stocked with food, and Mrs. Cummings, with the baby and her oldest son, drove in the buggy. It was very exciting, Mrs. Doane says, seeing her father and all the Confederate soldiers, but almost as exciting was the experience of camping with the other families who had also come to see soldier husbands and fathers.

Life on the plantation was very hard in those days, for everything which the family ate or wore or had need of in any way had to be manufactured at home. The family was up at dawn and glad to go to bed at night. The clothes they wore were spun and woven from their own cotton and wool. The dyes were all made at home. Wild indigo from the woods made a blue dye, 4 copperas was used for brown, walnut juice was mixed with something else, which Mrs. Doane has forgotten, to make black. Sufficient wheat, rice, corn, vegetables, potatoes, grain, meat, milk, eggs and butter were raised to feed those on the plantation, but there were a few things which could not be bought and for which substitutes had to be found. Among these were sugar, salt, coffee and tea. Brown sugar was made from sugar cane and had to serve the purpose of granulated sugar. Salt was very difficult to obtain. Mrs. Cummings dug up the dirt in her smoke house, boiled it and allowed it to drip to get the salt which had fallen from the meat in the years past. When this was exhausted, she sent to the coast and had salt water boiled to get the deposit. Parched wheat, rye and grits made a fair substitute for coffee and holly leaves and sassafras were used for tea. Hats were made out of palmetto gathered in Salkehatchie swamp - and pretty

ones they were, too, Mrs. Doane says. Even medicine was made at home. The nearest doctor was miles away and home remedies were always used for common ailments. If the patient did not respond to this treatment, then Mrs. Cummings sent for the doctor. The medicine cabinet was kept well stocked with home-concocted medicines, the ingredients for which were gathered in the woods and fields. For fever there was a bitter tea made from fever weed. It caused profuse perspiration and usually proved effective. An iron tonic was made by gathering the cinders from the blacksmith 5 shop, pounding them into fine powder and mixing with molasses and ginger to make it palatable. Syrup, ginger and soda made an excellent cough remedy. Cherokee root, oak bark, whiskey and another ingredient, which Mrs. Doane does not recall, was a good general tonic. Soap was all made on the plantation and was called lye soap. When soap-making time came, a number of hardwood trees were cut and burned on a clean-swept piece of ground. The ashes were gathered, wet and allowed to drip, then mixed with fat which had been saved for the purpose from the hog-killings.

Family life in these days was very different from now, Mrs. Doane says. Children were taught to be obedient and respectful to their parents and elders. As soon as they were large enough, they were given chores for which they were responsible. The boys worked on the plantation and the girls in the house. As soon as she was able to reach the thread in the loom, each girl was taught to spin and was required to spin two ounces of thread before she could go out to play.

On Sundays everybody went to church and in the evenings the children studied their lessons and the older ones read and sewed. The celebration of Christmas on the plantation during the four years of the war and immediately following was nothing like it is today. There were no gaily decorated trees and there were few gifts, except small ones to the children. For the girls there were rag dolls. Mrs. Doane says she remembers vividly 6 the first “bought” doll she ever had. Her baby sister broke it and she never got another because by then her father thought she was too big to play with dolls anyway. The doll was a china one and quite the prettiest thing she had ever had. Mrs. Doane says she has

never forgotten it. Easter was noted chiefly for the dyed eggs which mysteriously made their appearance.

When people visited in those days, whole families came for a day or several days. Visiting was especially heavy at Christmas, when uncles, aunts, cousins and friends came. In the evenings there would be parties. They played games unknown to this generation, but which furnished good amusement then. One of these was “spin-the-plate”, in which the players sat in a circle while someone spun a tin plate in the middle of the floor. The point of the game was to catch the plate before it stopped spinning and get back to a chair. The one left without a chair was “It”. Another game was “Steal partners.” There were also square dances, fish fries, sewing bees, log-rollings and quiltings. The log-rollings and quiltings were usually joint events and took place when some neighbor had a piece of new ground to be cleared. He would invite his friends for miles around and while the men cleared the ground, rolled the logs and burned them, the women quilted. Then would follow a big dinner and a party in the evening. Days of fasting and prayer for the war to end were frequently held.

Families were closer then than now, Mrs, Doane believes.

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There were fewer outside amusements and interests were centered in the home. People have changed in their attitude toward marriage more than in any other one thing, she thinks. When a couple married in those days, they expected to settle down and establish a home, have children and stay married as long as they both lived. Now, there is a feeling that if marriage doesn't work out as the couple would like, it can easily be dissolved. Her own father never went anywhere without her mother and they were rarely separated. Mrs. Doane recalls that once her mother went to the mountains with one of her older sisters and that her father was completely lost. He grieved so that they had to write their mother, without the knowledge of their father, to come home. She came and found a number of

gifts that her husband had bought for her during her absence, among them being an entire set of china.

Children did not get much education during and following the war. There were only small one-room, one-teacher schools, usually four or five miles away. Children walked the distance twice a day except in rainy weather, when they rode horseback. School was closed when time came to plant the crops, for the children were needed at home. They started again after the crops were planted and ran until it was time to harvest, when they closed again. They studied the old Blue Back Speller and later the Dictionary. Arithmetic, grammar, history and geography were also taught. When the one-teacher school was finished, 8 those who could afford it, sent their children into town to board and attend school.

Churches were small frame structures located four and five miles away. There was no way to heat the buildings but services were held in winter as well as summer. Each church usually had two services a month and although the Cummings' family were Baptists, they attended the Methodist church just as often as they did their own. Sunday School was held every Sunday afternoon beneath a brush arbor built for the purpose. It was a mile away from the plantation by the side of a little creek called Rice Patch. The creek was crossed by a foot log and the children thought it great fun to cross on this log.

Roads were built for teams and while fairly good in nice weather, they were pretty bad when it rained. They were worked by the men of the countryside. Each month the road supervisor would call out a certain number of men to work the roads and those who did not wish to work themselves had to hire somebody else to work for them, or else forfeit the right to vote.

Mr. Cummings owned only a few slaves and since slaves were expensive to own, he believed it to his advantage to treat them well in order to get the most interest out of his investment. The slaves lived in small, two-room cabins very such like the Negro cabins

of today. Each family had its own cabin, furnished with beds, tables, benches and other necessary furniture. The cloth for their clothing was woven by Mrs. Cummings with the 9 assistance of her daughters' and the slave women. When the cloth was made she cut the garments and gave them to the slave mothers to sew under her direction. The house slaves ate in the house, the same food being served them as was served the family. The others were given regular supplies of grits, meal, rice, potatoes, meat, molasses, etc. They were not taught to read and write but were given religious instruction on Sunday afternoons, when they mistress usually read the Bible and talked to them. When they were ill they were given the same medicine as she gave her children and if they did not respond at home treatment the doctor was called. The children of the slaves played with the white children of the house and many a good time they had, too, Mrs. Doane recalls.

Mrs. Doane remembers her father coming home from the war, six months after the conflict had ended. He had been in prison, and had to walk all the way home from the prison camp. She remembers that he would not come into the house until he had washed and changed his clothes in one of the outhouses on the place as he was covered with vermin. She recalls hearing him tell of a profitable little trading business he had developed while in prison. His initial stock consisted of some knitted gloves, socks and other articles which his wife had sent him. It had been very cold that winter and these warm articles of clothing were in great demand. Her father's brother had been killed during a battle in Virginia. The flag had been shot down and he 10 was the third man killed while attempting to run it up again.

In Mrs. Doane's neighborhood there was no Ku-Klux-Klan, nor was there any trouble with the Negroes during Reconstruction. She went to school in Walterboro during that time and remembers, however, that there was great excitement one night when it was rumored that the Negroes of the place planned to uprise against the whites. Fortunately, nothing came of it, though. She remembers hearing her father complain of the hard and unfair military rule at Walterboro.

Source: Mrs. I. E. Doane, 81 years old, Beaufort, S. C.